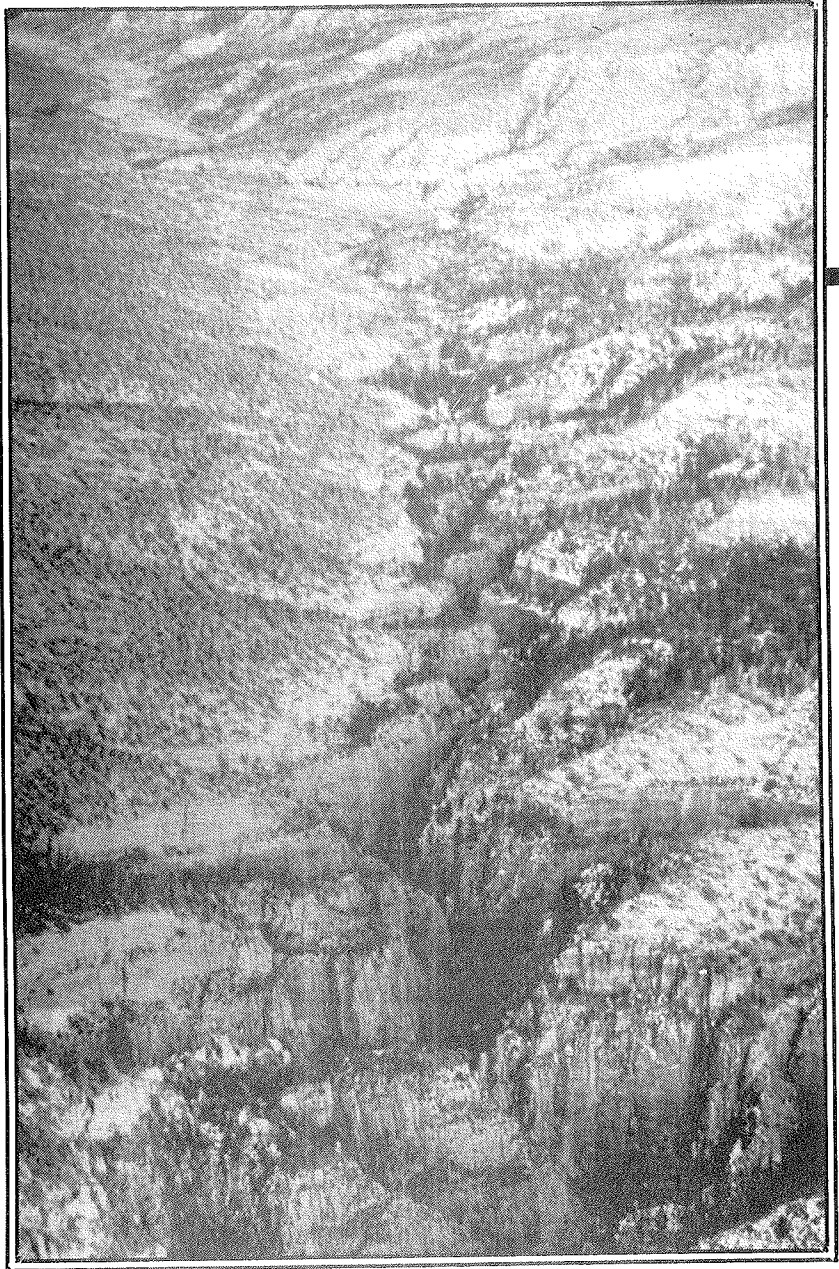
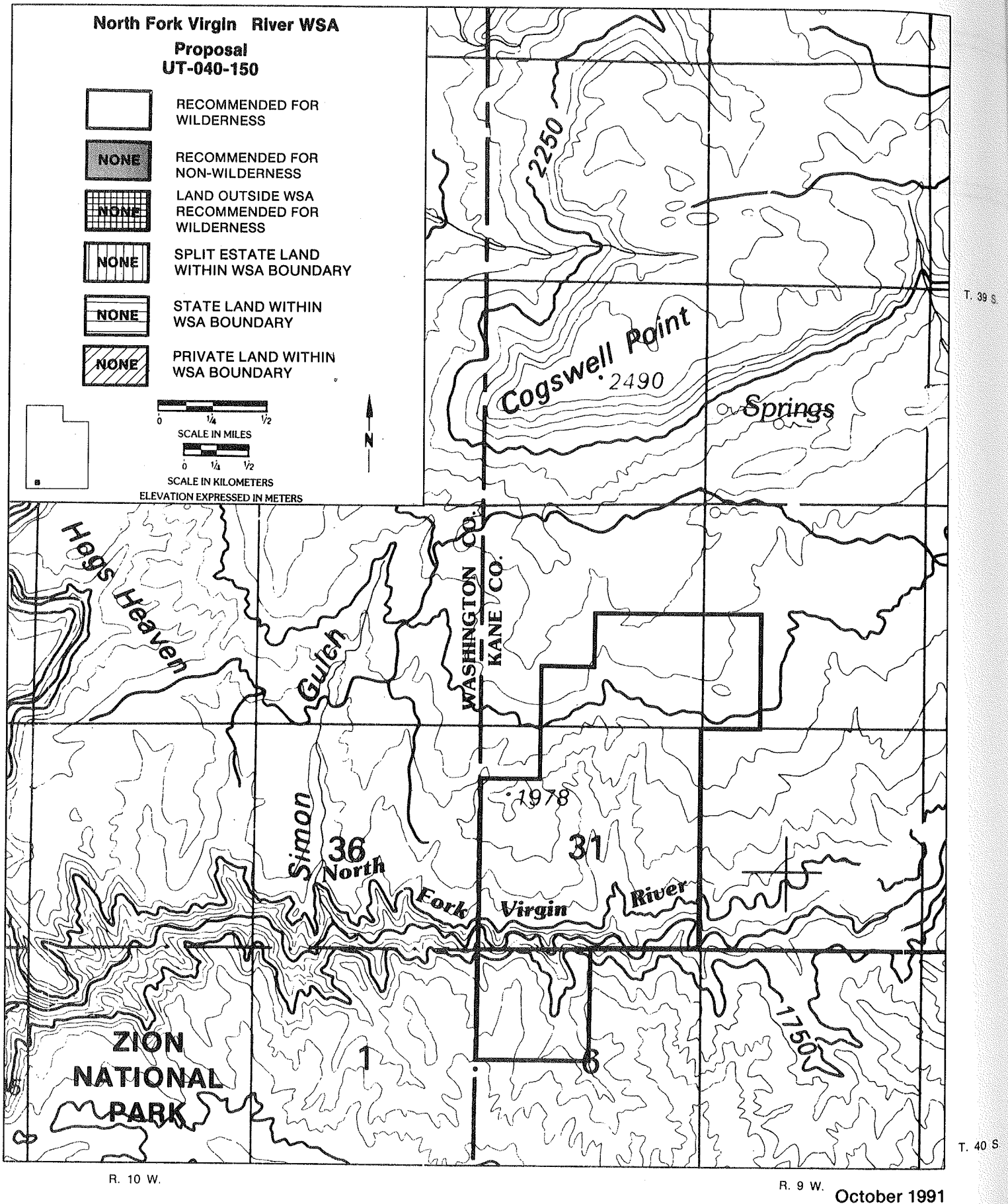


North Fork  
Virgin River WSA



# NORTH FORK VIRGIN RIVER WSA



# NORTH FORK VIRGIN RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

## 1. THE STUDY AREA: 1,040 acres

The North Fork Virgin River Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (UT-040-150) is in western Kane County along the eastern boundary of Zion National Park, about 45 miles from Kanab, Utah (population 2,148). The unit is 2 miles long from north to south and 1 mile wide, east to west (see Map). The WSA is entirely public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and does not include any State, private, or split-estate lands (see Table 1). The study area is bordered entirely by State and private land, except on the southwest where it adjoins Zion National Park for 0.50 mile.

The WSA is in the Grand Staircase, the southern end of the High Plateaus Section of the Colorado Plateau Physiographic Province.

The North Fork of the Virgin River flows eastward through a canyon in the southern part of the WSA. The segment of the Virgin River within the WSA is 1.5 miles long. Elevations range from about 5,400 feet on the canyon floor to 6,900 feet in the northern part of the WSA. Most of the area is covered by mountain shrub vegetation, consisting of pinyon, juniper, scrub oak, other kinds of brush, and bunch grasses. The remainder of the WSA is dominated by pinyon-juniper woodland with brush, forbs, and some Ponderosa pine.

The study area was dropped from wilderness status by the Secretary of the Interior in December, 1987, due to its small size, but because of its wilderness values and proximity to Zion National Park it was studied under Section 202 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA).

TABLE 1  
LAND STATUS AND ACREAGE SUMMARY IN THE STUDY AREA

| WITHIN THE WSA                                 | ACRES |
|--|-------|
| BLM (surface and subsurface)                   | 1,040 |
| Split-Estate (BLM surface only)                | 0     |
| In-holdings (State, Private)                   | 0     |
| Total  | 1,040 |
| WITHIN THE RECOMMENDED WILDERNESS BOUNDARY     |       |
| BLM (within the WSA)                           | 1,040 |
| BLM (outside the WSA)                          | 0     |
| Split-Estate (within the WSA)                  | 0     |
| Split-Estate (outside the WSA)                 | 0     |
| Total BLM land recommended for wilderness      | 1,040 |
| In-holdings (State, private)                   | 0     |
| WITHIN THE AREA NOT RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |       |
| BLM  | 0     |
| Split-Estate                                   | 0     |
| Total BLM land not recommended for wilderness  | 0     |
| In-holdings (State, Private)                   | 0     |

Source: BLM File Data

## NORTH FORK VIRGIN RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

The study area was included in the Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) finalized in November 1990. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: an all wilderness alternative, which is the recommendation in this report, and a no wilderness (no action) alternative.

### 2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE:

- 1,040 acres  
(recommended for wilderness)
- 0 acres  
(recommended for nonwilderness)

The recommendation in this report is to designate the entire area as wilderness. Designation of the entire area as wilderness is considered to be the environmentally preferable alternative as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long term. Little or no conflict with other uses exists.

The WSA is small but can be effectively managed as wilderness. Although it is small, it is an extension of the high wilderness values found on an adjacent National Park Service (NPS)-administered land in Zion National Park. The WSA has exceptional scenic values and cannot be visually distinguished from the adjacent National Park.

### 3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATION

#### Wilderness Characteristics

##### A. Naturalness

Naturalness is defined as an attribute in which the evidence of man is substantially unnoticeable to the average visitor and where minor imprints of man exhibit no cumulative impact that is substantially noticeable. The WSA basically appears as an untouched bench cut by a deep canyon system with outstanding scenic values equal in quality to those of Zion National Park. The area is covered with mountain shrubs intermixed with pinyon and juniper trees and some Ponderosa pine. The WSA is essentially natural.

A vehicular way traverses the northwestern portion of the area for 0.25 mile. It provided access to a timber harvest

area outside the unit and is occasionally used to monitor livestock. The way is not maintained, however, and is substantially unnoticeable.

##### B. Solitude

About 150 acres (14 percent of the WSA) on the canyon floor provide outstanding opportunities for solitude. Screening by vegetation and terrain is excellent, as the canyon floor is well below the upper benchlands, the canyon is sinuous, and thick vegetation covers parts of the canyon floor.

The remaining portion of the WSA slopes gently southward and provides little topographic screening.

##### C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Much the same land, about 150 acres, provides outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation, especially backpacking, bird watching, photography, and sightseeing. The North Fork of the Virgin River WSA is part of the upper access to the deep, very narrow Zion Narrows gorge which is a major attraction in Zion National Park.

Approximately 1.6 miles of the 13-mile hike to the Zion Narrows trailhead are within the WSA.

The upper benchlands, comprising the remaining 86 percent of the WSA, do not provide opportunities for recreational activities comparable to the Zion Narrows hike.

##### D. Special Features

The endangered bald eagle and peregrine falcon; as well as 12 additional animal species and four plant species that are considered to be sensitive, occur or may occur in the WSA. Elk and cougar also use the WSA. Although these species add to the wilderness values of the WSA, they are not confined to the North Fork Virgin River study area.

Refer to Appendix 4 and the Affected Environment, Vegetation and Wildlife Including Special Status Species sections of the Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Final EIS for additional information.

# NORTH FORK VIRGIN RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

## Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

### A. Expanding the Diversity of Natural Systems and Features as Represented by Ecosystems

Wilderness designation of this WSA would not add a potential natural vegetation (PNV) ecosystem that is not presently represented in the NWPS or other BLM study areas outside of Utah. The WSA is in the Colorado Plateau/Ecoregion. Juniper-pinyon woodland, the PNV that would develop if the WSA remained undisturbed, is represented in the NWPS in Utah in one area (Box-Death Hollow Wilderness, Dixie National Forest) and is represented in 53 other BLM study areas in Utah. This information is summarized in Table 2 from information compiled in December 1989.

### B. Assessing the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Recreation within a Days Driving Time (5 Hours) of Major Population Centers

The WSA is within a 5-hour drive of Las Vegas, Nevada. Table 3 shows the number and acreage of designated wilderness areas and of other BLM study areas within a 5-hour drive of this population center.

### C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The North Fork of the Virgin River WSA would not contribute significantly to balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas within the NWPS. As of January, 1987, the NWPS included 65 wilderness areas comprising 2,898,792 acres in Utah, Arizona, and Nevada.

TABLE 2  
ECOSYSTEM REPRESENTATION

|  | NWPS AREAS |           | OTHER BLM STUDIES |           |
|--|------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
|  | AREAS      | ACRES     | AREAS             | ACRES     |
| BAILEY-KUCHLER CLASSIFICATION (PNV)    |            |           |                   |           |
| NATIONWIDE (COLORADO PLATEAU PROVINCE) |            |           |                   |           |
| Juniper-Pinyon Woodland                | 11         | 1,401,745 | 84                | 2,142,965 |
| UTAH (COLORADO PLATEAU PROVINCE)       |            |           |                   |           |
| Juniper-Pinyon Woodland                | 1          | 26,000    | 53                | 1,657,895 |

Source: BLM File Data.

TABLE 3  
WILDERNESS OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENTS OF MAJOR POPULATION CENTERS

| POPULATION CENTERS | NWPS AREAS |           | OTHER BLM STUDIES |           |
|--------------------|------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
|                    | AREAS      | ACRES     | AREAS             | ACRES     |
| Las Vegas, Nevada  | 38         | 3,132,130 | 55                | 2,176,498 |

Source: BLM File Data.

Twelve designated wilderness areas are within 100 miles of the WSA. In a clockwise direction beginning to the north, are the 7,000-acre Ashdown Gorge Wilderness (Forest Service [FS]), the 25,751

-acre Box-Death Hollow Wilderness (FS), the 112,400-acre Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness (BLM), the 40,539-acre Saddle Mountain Wilderness (FS), the 70,500-acre Kanab Creek Wilderness (FS

## NORTH FORK VIRGIN RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

and BLM units), the 6,860-acre Cottonwood Point Wilderness (BLM), the 7,880-acre Mt. Trumbull Wilderness (BLM), the 14,650-acre Mt. Logan Wilderness (BLM), the 37,030-acre Grand Wash Cliffs Wilderness (BLM), the 87,900-acre Paiute Wilderness (BLM), the 18,630-acre Beaver Dam Mountains Wilderness (BLM), and, to the west, the 50,000-acre Pine Valley Mountain Wilderness (FS).

Manageability (The area must be capable of being managed effectively to preserve its wilderness character.)

Overall, the WSA could be effectively managed to preserve its wilderness character. Visitor access to the North Fork of the Virgin River canyon could become a manageability problem because the canyon enters private lands at both the upstream and downstream boundaries to the WSA. Visitor use associated with the Zion Narrows hike can be monitored and controlled through the cooperative efforts of the BLM and NPS.

The WSA receives relatively little grazing use. Two grazing permittees utilize 17 animal unit months (AUMs) of forage a year. Recreational use is higher, with recreational visitors spending about 4,000 visitor days annually in the WSA. There are no private or State inholdings to interfere with wilderness management, and there are no mineral leases in the WSA. Approximately eight mining claims cover 160 acres in the WSA, but there are no prospects, deposits or any other evidence of mineralization known to occur in the area. There are no other valid rights in the study area.

### Energy and Mineral Resource Values

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the U.S. Bureau of Mines (USBM) prepared a mineral assessment report for the North Fork Virgin River WSA (USGS Bulletin 1746-E, R.E. Van Loenen, et al., 1989). The report indicates that the mineral and energy potential for oil and gas is moderate, but is low for all metals and for geothermal sources. No resource potential exists for undiscovered coal or for undiscovered gypsum.

Subeconomic resources of common-variety sandstone and inferred subeconomic resources of limestone are within the WSA,

but these commodities have low unit value and similar materials are available elsewhere in the region closer to transportation and to markets.

### Impacts on Resources

The comparative impact table (Table 4) summarizes the effects on wilderness values which is considered to be the only pertinent resource that would be significantly affected by designation or nondesignation of the area as wilderness.

### Local Social and Economic Considerations

Social and economic factors were not considered to be significant issues in the EIS.

### Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. Comments received during the early stages of the EIS preparation were used to develop significant study issues and alternatives for the ultimate management of the WSA.

During formal public review of the Draft EIS, a total of 41 inputs specifically addressing this WSA were received from 49 commenters, including oral statements received at 17 public hearings on the EIS. Each letter or oral testimony was considered to be one input. Duplicate letters or oral statements by the same commenter were not counted as additional inputs or signatures. Each individual was credited with one signature or testimony regardless of the number of inputs.

In general, 39 commenters supported wilderness designation for part or all of the WSA, while one commenter was opposed. Nine commenters addressed the relative merits of the EIS but took no formal position on wilderness designation.

Those favoring wilderness commented on the primitive recreational opportunities and special features. Those favoring wilderness in their comments were almost evenly divided among rural and urban Utah and those from outside the state. Of particular concern was the need to



## NORTH FORK VIRGIN RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

protect wilderness values and complement proposed NPS Wilderness.

The commenter opposing wilderness was concerned that wilderness would preclude mineral exploration, cause problems in water rights and use, conflict with other land use plans, and also stated that the WSA lacks naturalness.

Two Federal agencies, the USBM and NPS, commented on the Draft EIS for the North Fork Virgin River WSA. The USBM indicated that the Draft EIS was written without the findings of the USGS and USBM mineral reports, and that the reports would be ready for use in the Final EIS. Their report was utilized in preparation of the Final EIS and study report.

The NPS supported wilderness designation for the WSA and provided information on the potential for endangered species in the area.

No comment letters were received on the Final EIS.

There are no State sections in the WSA. In commenting on the Draft EIS, the State of Utah expressed general opposition to wilderness designation but did not take a definite position regarding wilderness designation of the WSA. The State commented that the less than 5,000-acre areas surrounding Zion National Park, including the North Fork Virgin River WSA, are natural, logical extensions of Zion National Park. The State noted that there are land use conflicts found in gas company reports on the area. These reports identify oil and gas potential in LaVerkin Creek Canyon, Deep Creek, North Fork Virgin River, Red Butte, Spring Creek Canyon, The Watchman, Taylor Creek Canyon, Goose Creek Canyon, and Beartrap Canyon WSAs. The State suggested that given the small size of the units and their adjacency to Zion National Park, additional study should be given to the potential of transferring most of these WSAs from the BLM to the NPS management. The BLM and NPS agree that transferral of administration is a separate issue, independent of the wilderness review.

The North Fork Virgin River WSA is in Kane County. The Kane County Master Plan supports the total concept of multiple

use of lands and rejects wilderness as an exclusionary recreational form that cannot be used by the average recreation visitor. The County Commission has indicated that they do not support wilderness designation for this WSA. In commenting on the Draft EIS, Kane County opposed designation of the North Fork Virgin River WSA and questioned its WSA status because it is less than 5,000 acres.

The Washington County Water Conservancy District has identified and conducted limited feasibility studies on a reservoir site immediately upstream of the WSA on the North Fork of the Virgin River. The Conservancy District opposes wilderness designation of the WSA because it could affect the potential for construction of the reservoir. BLM's position is that reservation of water is already required for Zion National Park downstream of the WSA, and that wilderness designation would not significantly add to the constraints already placed on the river.

# NORTH FORK VIRGIN RIVER WSA

Table 4  
Comparative Summary of Impacts by Alternative

| Alternatives                       |  |   |
|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Issue Topics                       | Recommendation<br>All Wilderness<br>(1,040 Acres)  | No Action/No Wilderness   |
|                                    |  |   |
| Impacts on<br>Wilderness<br>Values | Wilderness values would be preserved throughout the WSA. This alternative would complement wilderness management goals of the NPS on contiguous lands. Designation would provide additional protection for 1.5 miles of the North Fork of the Virgin River, a segment of the National Wild and Scenic River Inventory. | The WSA would not be protected by wilderness designation. No disturbance that would affect wilderness values would be expected in the foreseeable future. This alternative would not complement the NPS wilderness proposal on adjacent lands. Wild and scenic values of the North Fork of the Virgin River would not be provided additional protection. Vehicular use of a 0.25 mile of way would continue to occasionally detract from opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. |